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REMINISCENCES OF PENNSYLVANIA FOLK-LORE.

THE locality from which I draw these reminiscences is the southern portion of Chester County, Pennsylvania, a few miles north of "Mason and Dixon's Line," the scene of my own boyhood. The time is about twoscore years ago.

The population at that date was almost entirely American-born, the Irish element having not yet penetrated there to any great extent. The general intelligence was above the average in the State, a result owing to the interest always taken in practical education by the Society of Friends, by whom the region had been settled in the earliest days of the colony of Penn.

The farms were large, often from four to six hundred acres, the farmhouses usually roomy stone mansions, with spacious barns and wide shedding, the farmyard surrounded by high stone walls, not for protection against attack, but as inclosures for the herds of cattle which fattened yearly on the succulent grass pasturage. The farm laborers were nearly all negroes, and lived in log cabins; not, as in the Southern States, grouped near the manor house, but scattered irregularly over the farms. Many of these negroes had come from the adjacent slave States of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.

Much of the superstition and folk-lore of my early home could be traced to this negro element; but some of it had other sources. Thus, many of the farmers observed the phases of the moon in the sowing and planting of crops, in felling timber, in cutting weeds, in the renewal of their live-stock, in the preparation of the soil, and in the killing and curing of meats for food. To this day I expect many of these beliefs survive in that part of the country, and they have at times been defended in the local newspapers as the observed results of experience. Yet there can scarcely be a doubt but that they descend directly from that remote period when the moon was the goddess of moisture, the fields, the growing crops, and reproduction in general. Just such superstitions prevail in France, and the eminent

Arago thought it worth his time to write a treatise against them. This origin is further substantiated by the belief, in my childhood nigh universal, that the moon exerts a distinct influence on the weather, controls, in fact, the rains and dews. Now, if anything is clearly settled by the meteorological observations carried out in this country, it is that no such influence exists, and we must explain it as a purely imaginary action, a survival of ancient mythology, which placed the moon-goddess at the head of the celestial weather bureau of Olympus.

Another belief which I remember was accepted without question was that which gave us our word "lunatic;" to wit, that insanity, especially periodical recurrent insanity, is caused by exposure to the rays of the moon. I believe it is acknowledged by alienists that the increased light at the time of full moon excites certain classes of patients; but in my early days I recall several "moon-struck" persons who regularly became unmanageable for the three days of full moon, and were quite sane at other dates. They were all colored people, and I doubt if it was anything more than an hallucination.

Many of the superstitions which Grimm narrates as occurring among the Scotch and North Germans were familiar beliefs in the neighborhood where I passed my boyhood. I was often told that one should have his hair cut in the waxing moon if a strong growth was wished for; while, if it was desired to extirpate weeds and briars so that they should not sprout again, they must be cut down in the wane of the moon. For some allied notion, it was the custom to cut trees for use as firewood in the wane of the moon, as the timber cured more soundly, and was less apt to become soggy and sputtery.

The latter is also a Scotch superstition, and there is a Lowland agricultural maxim, "Cut wood when the moon is wadel," the word *wadel* meaning disappearing, diminishing, or waning.

Jacob Grimm in his "Teutonic Mythology," after bringing forward a mass of kindred superstitions, offers the general theory that, in folk-lore, operations requiring severance, dissolution, cutting down, or removing from, promise best results if conducted in the wane of the moon; while those of the opposite character are appropriate to the new moon. Thus, you should marry and you should move into a new house at the new moon. He also alludes to the prevalent fear in some localities of being "moon-struck." For example: the Slavonic washerwomen in Galicia will not allow clothes to hang on the line overnight at full moon, as they believe the dirt will still show in them; while some German peasants will not drink from a mug into which the moon has been shining, lest they become moon-struck. These superstitions are strictly on the line of those which prevailed forty years ago, and perhaps continue to-day, in the locality I am speaking of.

One of the "signs" to which considerable attention was paid was the first sight of the new moon. If this was to the left, especially if it was over the left shoulder, the presage was unfavorable, and some bad luck would occur during that moon; but if on the right hand, then the lunar month would be a prosperous one. So permanent are the impressions of childhood that I think I now never see the new moon without this ancient superstition recurring to my mind. Of course, its roots run far back into those archaic associations which led the left hand to be considered that tending toward evil fortune, and which imparted to the adjective *sinister* its peculiar and ill-boding significance.

By some it was held that the sign varied with the nature of the crop to be planted. Root crops, such as turnips, potatoes, carrots, and the like, which ripen their edible portions beneath the soil, should be planted in the wane of the moon, or, as the local expression was, in the "sinking" sign, in contradistinction to the "rising" signs, which were those of the increasing orb.

Even such a matter as fence-building should be carried on with due respect to these potent influences. A fence should be constructed in the "rising" signs, for if the posts be planted, and the corner stones which support the rails in a worm fence be located in the "sinking" signs, the former will rot more readily, and the latter will sink into the ground and allow the bottom rails to decay.

There was, I remember, some discrepancy in the opinions of the times when the moon indicated the weather about to prevail. Some said it would be at the quarters; others, the third day after the quarters; and others again, the fifth and sixth days after the new moon.

The myth of buried treasure, the tale of the local Nibelungen hoard, was one with which I was early familiar. At a remote corner of my father's farm was a stagnant pool and swamp, in summer studded with the graceful stalks of the cat-tail or sweet flag. Rising beyond the swamp was a barren hillside scantily covered with tufts of wire grass and stunted trees. The legend was that once, early in the century, "after the Revolution," and before the old people could remember, there was a lonely log cabin by the pond. In it lived a solitary and misanthropic man. No one knew his history, nor even his full name. At last he fell sick, and some neighbors charitably came to attend him. As death approached, he called them to his bedside, and told them that during the Revolution he had been a spy for the British; that for this traitorous service he had been paid much gold, but through avarice or remorse he had spent none of it. He had placed it in a crock and buried it in the hillside above his cabin. He desired that they should dig it up, and give it to some

good object. But, alas ! just as he was proceeding to state exactly the spot where to dig, the death rattle seized him, and his tongue refused its function.

So ran the story, and it was so well believed that many a pit in the hillside testified to the labors of the treasure-seekers. It was believed that if one sleeps over a buried treasure he will dream of it, and I remember finding men sleeping in the grass on the hillside, hoping that the lucky inspiration would come to them.

I have now my doubts whether the whole story was not an echo of some one of the Old World myths of the concealed hoard.

It will be noted that the treasure is stated to have been blood-money, the price of treachery, and that it brought no happiness to the owner. Like the hoard of the Nibelungs, it was lost through hiding, since the owner failed to give clear enough directions as to its whereabouts. These traits seem to brand it as a modern and localized form of that ancient and cosmopolite folk-tale which inspired the Nibelungenlied, Siegfried and the Dragon, and so on.

Thunder-storms are frequent and often severe in that locality. Prudent housewives were careful to put out the fire when they saw one approaching, as it was believed that the smoke attracted the lightning. All held firmly to the opinion that a tree which had been once struck would not be liable to the accident again. The stone arrow-heads left by the aboriginal population were sometimes pointed out as "thunderbolts," formed or deposited where the lightning struck the ground. Stones in general were believed to "grow" in the ground, and the lightning aided their development ; for that reason the upland fields were stonier than those in the valley.

I can recall a few stories of mythical animals whose existence was fully credited, though it was difficult to find the person who would acknowledge to have seen them.

One of these, I believe, was a direct descendant of the werewolf of the Middle Ages. It was a big black dog with fiery eyes, which never appeared except at night, and was an object of terror to those who had heard of him. A few miles from my father's house there was a narrow valley, called "Sandy Hollow," where the road descended into a dark and tangled grove, a remnant of the primeval forest. It was like a ravine, with steep ascent and descent, and remote from any house. Here the black dog was supposed to have a favorite lair, and the laboring men at night would make a circuit to avoid the uncanny spot.

I strongly suspect that this dog represented the werewolf, the more so as I find in Grimm that in some German localities the mediæval wolf has been supplanted in popular tale by a dog. But I cannot remember that the dog was believed to be a person who had taken that form, as is the case in the genuine legend.

Another animal which had no existence other than in the popular imagination was the hoop-snake. I repeatedly heard of this reptile as a real creature. He was said to take his tail in his mouth, stiffen his body, and revolve like a wheel, with such rapidity that a horse could not overtake him. When pressed for the exact place where he lived, my informants would reply, "In the barr'ns," or, "Down Mārlan'."

Whether or not this hoop-snake fable was an ancient sun-myth sunk to an ordinary snake story, I shall not venture to say. We all know that the snake with his tail in his mouth is a very common symbol of the motion of the sun and the flight of time in the mythical devices of both hemispheres.

Certainly the belief in some connection of the serpent with the sun is visible in another notion which was widely credited among my boyish companions, that is, that if you kill a black snake, and hang him across a fence, his tail will continue to vibrate until the sun goes down, and then will cease.

Connected with notions about snakes was the belief that a species of dragon-fly which frequents swampy ground acted as guard or acolyte to the serpents which dwelt there. The only name by which I knew the dragon-fly in my boyhood was "snake-servant." I was told that these flies warned the snakes of approaching danger, and aided them in the acquisition of food. It would be imprudent to kill a "snake-servant," as its master, the snake, would be angry, and would attack the slayer on the first occasion.

These flies are also called "snake-feeders," their principal duty being to seek out food and indicate to their lords, the serpents, where it was to be found.

Cats, though as favorite household pets as elsewhere, were looked upon as uncanny creatures. It was surely bad luck to kill one. It was unsafe to leave one in the room with a babe, as pussy would suck its breath and thus take away its life. Nor should a cat be permitted in the room with a corpse. At an unguarded moment it would fly at the dead face and tear it with its sharp claws.

Various animals could predict the weather. The apparition of the ground-hog on a certain day in February was watched for. If he looked around and went promptly back, the spring would be late; if he remained out most of the day, it would be early.

The croak of the tree-frog foretold rain, and the color of the breast-bone of a fall goose indicated the severity of the winter; the darker the bone, the harder would be the cold.

The belief in the exercise of magic powers for evil was universal among the lower classes. It was locally known as "cunjuring," and it could be directed against both man and beasts. I have seen warts

in the manes and tails of horses, tied there for the purpose of causing them to be violent and tricky. A favorite means of "cunjuring" was by the agency of certain roots, known only to the initiated. These were sometimes hidden in the house of the person it was intended to injure, or buried beneath the path which led across the fields to his house. They were supposed to bring him bad luck in his affairs or sickness to himself or his family. I have often heard people who met with a series of such misfortunes, or when things went wrong with them, complain of being "cunjured."

When cows gave bloody milk it was the result of "cunjuring," and there were various suggestions for the cure of this condition by magical means, but I do not clearly recall them.

In a region so much occupied with dairy produce, there were many observances relating to the cow and her product. The milk and butter were kept in spring houses. It was good luck to keep a frog or a snake in the spring. This of course may have had a ground in reason, as by eating the organic material they would render the water purer; but I doubt if this was regarded as their chief function.

As a means of avoiding the influence of "cunjuring," and generally to protect one from maleficent influences, certain charms were in frequent use. The most common of these was the horseshoe. I have seen it nailed over the door of a cabin or against the wall inside, not in the humorous spirit of our day, but as a serious and needful safeguard. More vaguely I remember lucky stones, pocket pieces, small potatoes, and horse-chestnuts carried about on the person to insure against ill-fortune or sickness.

The belief that rheumatism can be prevented by wearing some such charm, I have since heard of in other localities, and it must be widespread. So, unquestionably, is the formula to cure a sty, which I frequently heard recommended in my youth. The directions were specific to go alone and by night to a crossroads and say: —

Sty! Sty! go out of my eye,
And go on the stranger who next passes by.

Curiously enough, I do not think that the very uncharitable nature of this invocation ever occurred to either myself or my advisers; and this, also, is an interesting survival, for to primitive man every stranger is an enemy, and all injuries that can be inflicted on him are so many advantages to the tribe. The ancient Welsh laws authorized the killing of three classes of men on sight, — the outlaw, the madman, and *the stranger*.

The dispersion of those trifling but disfiguring excrescences, warts, was generally by magical means. The warts should be bathed

in the water in which the blacksmith cooled his irons, when the latter was not looking; or they should be rubbed with a piece of raw meat which had been stolen, and the meat should be buried under a stone. As it decayed, the warts would disappear. Or a string should be stolen, and as many knots tied in it as there were warts to remove; the string should then be buried. I remember trying the first-mentioned of these plans myself, with very successful results.

Warts were firmly believed to be "catching," and it was well to avoid shaking hands with a person who had them. They could also be caught from the udders of cows; but the most certain method of producing them was to handle a toad. This doubtless arose from the similarity of the dermic corrugations on the animal to warts on the hands. The toad was also said to eject a saliva which would cause a wart to grow where it touched the skin.

A saliva charm, which may have been mentioned by Mrs. Bergen in her discussion of those curious superstitions, was that when you put on a pair of new boots you should spit on them; but it was important not to permit others to do the same; so there would be a struggle among boys to torment one with new boots by spitting on them.

Signs and presages of death were sufficiently numerous, but I doubt if any of them were peculiar to the locality. To carry a hoe through the house, to rock an empty chair in an absent-minded manner with the foot, to dream of the loss of a front tooth, were intimations of the decease of some friend or neighbor or member of the family. The "death tick" was often referred to, and I have heard its peculiar sound, like the ticking of a large, old-fashioned clock, reckoning time toward eternity.

The incident of death itself was held to be frequently associated with some physical, external manifestation. At the moment of the departure of the spirit, a weight would be heard to drop in some unoccupied room, or there would be a buzzing sound, like that of a swarm of bees, outside the window. What these might signify was not stated.

Haunted spots were not uncommon. One house, not far from my father's, was haunted because a man died there in some mysterious manner, and the doctors cut him up; a reminiscence, I now think, of a coroner's inquest and an official autopsy. At any rate, the house, a fine country mansion, was believed to bring bad luck to its inmates, and service in it was avoided by the local domestic servants. Their prejudices were not lessened by a curious series of reverses and misfortunes which actually did pursue the various occupants of the place.

Ghosts, it is needless to say, were familiar to us as children. One of them used to haunt a certain hillock at no great distance from the paternal mansion. From time to time it would be seen there in the gray night light. The tradition was, that on that spot a Hessian soldier had been killed and buried during the Revolution, and that his spirit was restless in his foreign grave.

There were other legends which, like this one, were connected with the battle of the Brandywine, the scene of which was but a few miles distant. On the floor of the old Quaker meeting-house, into which the wounded were carried, could still be seen certain dark spots which we were told were the stains of human blood, and that no washing could erase them. I remember looking at these discolorations with even more awe than I have since regarded those on the marble basin in the Hall of the Abencerrages, to your right as you enter the Alhambra, where the members of that unfortunate family were beheaded to the last man. Perhaps sober science would tell us that the latter stains are but the ferruginous veins in the marble, and the former but progressive dryrot in the old boards ; but we do not wish to be dragging science into everything, or what should we have thrilling and romantic left ?

To return to ghosts. There was another spot which they frequented. It bore the uncanny name "Gallows Hill," because in some early day a gallows had been erected there, and one or more men hanged thereon. In a community which had been peopled by Quakers, who disapprove of capital punishment, such an occurrence was felt as a deep shock to the moral sense, and the spot was shunned, and fell into the worse repute as the belief grew that the restless spirits of the criminals still hovered around the windy hill-top where they met their fate.

Though I cannot speak from personal observation of these particular ghosts, I can of others, as I was somewhat of a ghost-seer myself in those days ; a faculty which I regret I lost as I advanced in years. I remember on two occasions seeing distinctly such supernal visitors. Both times it was in broad daylight and I was in sound health.

Once it was out of doors in a garden, the next time at the entrance of the roomy garret of my father's house. Of course, with such evidence of my own, I was quite prepared to accept without question the statements of others on such points.

A sign of bad luck on a journey was for one to return to the house for something forgotten, after he had passed out the gate. I believe it could be neutralized by not closing the door or gate on returning. Persons would rather suffer some inconvenience than take the risk of incurring this evil presage. It was deeply impressed upon me by an incident of my boyhood. Some miles from us there lived a

widow, one of whose sons was drowned while bathing. I heard with awe that, as he was leaving the house to go with his companions, he returned three times to get some trifle. His mother implored him not to join the party, fearing the omen of these returns, but he laughed at her fears as silly, and went forth to his death.

The folk-lore of food-taking offered nothing that I remember which was peculiar. We held that it was bad luck to upset the salt, but that the effect could be neutralized by throwing some over the left shoulder. If one inadvertently helped to himself a dish of which he already had some, it was a sign that a hungry visitor would soon come. To take the last piece of bread on the plate was a sign that you would go hungry.

In these scattered reminiscences I have confined myself strictly to my own recollections. There are many others which float too vaguely in my mind to be sure of their outlines; and yet others which I have learned by inquiry in later years, but which I am not certain were of the place and time of which I have been writing. The large influx of Irish laborers and domestics since I was a boy has introduced a mass of folk-lore and superstitious notions which did not exist there at that time. For instance, I never heard that Friday was an unlucky day; or that the number thirteen was ominous at a repast; or that one should stroke one's self to avoid the influence of a bad sign, which is evidently derived from the *signum crucis*; or a variety of other modified beliefs which come from Christian observances.

It is easily seen that the folk-lore of my early home had in it little that was peculiar. Most of the traits recall familiar English customs; and the chief interest that I can claim for this article is that it is a faithful statement, so far as it goes, of folk-lore as it prevailed nearly fifty years ago in a small, well-defined area of our country.

D. G. Brinton.

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